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AUTHOR Stearns, Peter N.
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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a rationale for including social history in American and European history courses at the high school level. Social history topics which can be of special interest to high school students include the history of schools, the history of leisure, the history of health practices, the needs and experiences of various vital groups in society, and the drama of conflicting views between the working classes and middle classes. A major benefit of social history is that it can be taught with an interdisciplinary focus. For example, social science methods and concerns can help students understand a variety of socio-historical issues such as changes in basic human relationships at different periods throughout history (psychology), the role of old people today and during earlier times (gerontology), and medical practices before and after the institution of medicare (the sociology of medicine). Further, a study of social history can give students and teachers useful insights as they compare what society is like today with how it got that way. Specifically, a study of social history can help students analyze present and past trends regarding issues such as crime and can help people place current crime statistics in perspective; can force students to examine fundamental assumptions about the present in relationship to the past; and can promote intelligent discussion of values. (DB)

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JUSTIFYING SOCIAL HISTORY IN THE SCHOOLS

By

Peter N. Stearns

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JUSTIFYING SOCIAL HISTORY IN THE SCHOOLS

Peter N. Stearns

These are not good days, one hears, for educational innovation. Not only budgets but also imaginations are tight, when it comes to what is taught, and how. We are here today to discuss aspects of a rather extensive effort to add to what is now being taught in mainline high school history courses, toward introducing some specific social history components. I assume that, had this been attempted 10 years ago, we could have gone a considerable way toward justifying this effort simply by noting it was innovative -- which it is. We could then comment on some failures of more traditional history courses, in not keeping pace with student interests and in many cases not interesting students much at all; quite possibly some of this justification would still have validity today, at least insofar as conventional history continues to lag in the student image.

But the days of such facile explanation of the reasons for touting a new approach to history teaching are not with us now. They were never as rich as some imagined, in that history teaching did not in practice yield massively to the varied pleas for innovation in the fertile 1960s and 1970s. And I think one can welcome the need for greater care in justifying a new approach: it's good because it's not been tried before is not, to a historian at least, a really appealing line of argument. One must hasten to note, with regard to the curriculum of the Project of Social History, that what is intended is not full-scale innovation in any event. The thematic curricula being developed can be fitted into established American and European history courses, as special segments; they do not require the

jettisoning of the basic conventional framework. But if even one 4-week theme is introduced -- as a single segment or divided into appropriate chronological subsets -- conventional coverage will have to be squeezed a bit. And the thematic units themselves are new, not offered in available textbooks and rarely taught as discrete subjects in high school history or social studies.

So if we are dealing with novelty in a period of educational retrenchment, there is particular need to explain why we think the novelty is warranted. This is all the more the case in that the units we are preparing reflect a "second generation" of interests in social history that do not have some of the obvious democratic appeal of the first wave of social history research in the United States. A decade ago, social history meant mainly the study of the inarticulate, and more specifically Blacks, ethnic groups, women and the lower classes. The topics were important, and still are, and they could have some influence on the actual teaching of history because of their role in calling attention to the needs and experiences of vital groups in our own population. The current emphasis in social history continues to embrace the effort to get the experience of the whole population, and its leading segments. But it has shifted from the emphasis on major, politically important groups, to the basic experiences of life, in their historical dimension. Thus, a study of the history of leisure involves attention to the activities of ordinary people, but there is no neat leisure constituency to argue that its group deserves its due place in the historical sun.

So why study the history of leisure, or of health practices, or of childrearing, at the high school level? Why rock a back to basics boat by arguing that the basics of history have changed, and can be captured only

by curriculum innovation?

The first reason must be mentioned with some hesitation; I think it is important, but I do not know how much and I would not expect it to appeal to many high school students. The fact is, however, that the introduction of a serious social history component to the schools helps reduce the gap that has opened up between school history, on the one hand, and the research edge of history -- and along with it much college-level history teaching -- on the other. That a gap now exists is, I think, incontestable. Gertrude Himmelfarb, writing in the New York Times book review section last August, claimed that most historical research in the United States has turned into social history, and though as a social historian I still like to believe that I can disclaim some of what is being done as belonging to some other kind of history, there is little question that methods and issues of social history have spread into the concerns not only of social history per se, but also of intellectual and political history, while most of the special topics segments of historical research, such as Black, women's, or labor history, have become increasingly sociohistorical as well. Without claiming exhaustive research into what is taught in the high schools, and certainly without downgrading some interesting teaching in social history, particularly on some special topics, in some schools, it seems clear that school history has not changed nearly as much as research history has. Understandably, college curricula have kept up better, which means that there is a wider school/college gap in curriculum emphasis than there once was.

Now I am painfully aware that citing a gap is not the same thing as proving that it should be filled. High school teachers and students might well cite special learning needs or socialization needs that keep school

history different in topic, as well as in level of sophistication, from research history. This is the case already in France, where almost all historical research is in social history -- at a very high average level -- but where school history remains resolutely political and cultural, stressing the political development of France and its intellectual glories. Viewed from afar, this split, which is really a reflection of the French belief, only somewhat modified in recent years, that school education is to inculcate the masses whereas real intellectual life is reserved for an elite, does not look particularly attractive, at least for an American context. I would question its political implications, and I would certainly question the division of the definition and use of history which it promotes.

Again, I admit that the statement of a division does not dictate remedy. For that, we must look further, to the implications of social history for the schools. I think it has been shown that certain themes of social history greatly enrich the understanding of conventional history, defining the latter as concentrating primarily on political and perhaps intellectual change. It is now needlessly narrow, even arid, to approach the revolutionary period of the early 19th century (or the urban agitation and Jacksonian democracy of the same period in the United States) without serious attention to the crisis in work values and work settings attendant upon the advent not only of factories but of larger market relationships. The drama of conflicting views, largely traditional on the part of the working classes, time- and maximization oriented in the case of the new middle classes, is a vital facet of social history, but it also, obviously, informed the tide of political change and the ambiguous results of political protest. Only a bit less obviously, the results of the Depression -- even the political results -- now

demand interpretation in light of the impact on family values and roles. Or somewhat more grandiosely, the meaning of the Enlightenment now requires attention to childrearing practices, not only in the spread of new values through education and parental advice, but in the causation of new ideas through the complex reordering -- and improvement -- of the view of the basic nature of the human child in ordinary family behavior. In these cases and others, conventional history of the sort that sees politics causing politics causing politics, in a self-contained environment that rarely encompasses ordinary people or the non-political aspects of ordinary lives, is just not accurate any longer. The approach is also needlessly dull and lifeless, and it need not be endured because it is also incorrect. I grant that both social and conventional historians have complicated the intertwining of the two kinds of history by too often resolutely ignoring each other, so that social historians have not fully integrated their concerns with the undeniably important stuff of ordinary political history. Too many social historians spin off studies of social mobility or attitudes toward death without much concern for links with other human activities. But connections have been made, and a heightened attention to the pedagogical dimension of social history will require still others to be forged. This is one translation of the surge of social history at the research level that the schools cannot legitimately escape. It is the clearest reason that even a back-to-basics movement must recognize that the history that must be presented -- and hopefully memorized, still more hopefully digested -- has changed during the past two decades.

To this, interdisciplinary appeal can be added. Social history materials allow some hope of a realistic combination of social science

concerns and concepts, with historical materials and methods. Criminology, demography, the sociology of medicine, gerontology all now have clear branchings in solid sociohistorical work; so of course do stratification and mobility analysis and family sociology. Even psychology must increasingly come to terms with changes in fairly basic human relationships, including emotional intensity within the family, sexual habits, and personal privacy. It is not fanciful to project a school-level social history course serving as a vehicle for solid work in various social sciences connected by the effort to move across the various facets of a given society in a given period, and enriched by the juxtaposition of data from present and coherent past.

All of this remains, however, something of an undersell, or at least an unduly academic pitch best suited for seeking foundation grants and appealing to imaginative teachers. The goals thus far suggested would benefit students exposed to school materials in social history, but as arguments would I suspect appeal to few of them. To be sure, the college historian who hopes to reach into the high schools even for the non-profit motives of the present project is quickly told that it is not students he must persuade, but teachers. Still, I like to believe that an effort to rouse students to a new set of interests and involvements will be persuasive to their mentors as well; and I definitely believe that the heart of the effort to introduce students to the newest generation of sociohistorical concerns -- the grasp of the historical dimension of the various facets of ordinary life and mentalities -- lies in the building of a new kind of involvement in history.

For what social historians are now attempting is in essence the historical projection of the kinds of concerns most people have in shaping their own lives and in judging their own society. We clearly evaluate

life today in terms of crime as well as political institutions, sports and health as well as the state of philosophy. But as a society we tend to bifurcate our evaluations, using at least some historical sense in the political and intellectual categories, but only a vague frame of reference for the rest.

One result, of course, is a set of errors in judgment, and not the least of the purposes of the introduction of social history in the schools is to challenge -- and I would hope gradually to dislodge -- these errors. Crime and the cities are not linked in any simple way; city growth, with all its tensions, has historically been associated in a number of cases with a decline in crime. This is worth knowing, because it affects our evaluation of the inevitability of crime today. The family has not neatly moved from extended to nuclear, and relatedly the position of the elderly has not moved simply from veneration to rejection with the progress of modernization. These judgments too, against a good bit of durable popular and journalistic (and regrettably still, sociological) belief, are important to convey at the high school level.

But even some vital restifications do not constitute the main point. One moves closer in suggesting that some of the more surprising socio-historical findings -- along with the increasing realization that aspects of human behavior we tend to regard as innate and therefore historyless, such as youthful romantic love as a felt emotion, are in fact products of past historical constructs -- are not only factually sound, but intriguing; and that the discussion of the implications of the findings for the nature of contemporary life is truly revealing. For the purpose of teaching social history, and I believe the real motivation

for social history research and the cause of its growing crescendo, is the confrontation of what our society is like with how it got that way. It requires an assessment of our own values, in aspects of life that should be discussed rather than assumed.

This claim can be briefly analyzed at three related levels. First, many of the subjects of social history, given the steady widening of topical range, fall into categories that we routinely subject to an implicit historical judgment. Newspaper fare regularly suggests problems in crime levels or family life on the basis of assumptions about the past. Politicians now routinely comment on phenomena such as a decline in the work ethic, which is essentially a historical judgment. Less examined, but present, are assumptions about medical care or the growth of leisure activities. It is virtually impossible to gain much understanding in these human activities simply by examining and categorizing present patterns. There must be some sense of trend, some sense of how behavior is moving from past through present to, possibly, future. Except perhaps by comparative analysis we would have no idea whether our crime problems were good, bad or indifferent unless we thought we knew what past levels involved. Historical thinking is thus almost inescapable when we try to assess the quality of our society. Yet, obviously, this thinking is rarely based on very serious research and operates often on an almost mythic plane. What social history teaching can do is simultaneously make explicit the need for historical thinking in these basic aspects of life and give some data, in key topical areas, for its enlightened conduct. Social historians judge past life, in other words, in much the same terms as we as laymen judge present life, and the linkage is vital to the lay judgment.

Social history also forces us to examine fundamental assumptions about the present in relationship to the past. If our beliefs about modern crime lead to sometimes excessive nostalgia about the past, some stickier instances derive from the more pervasive modern belief in progress. Two illustrations here, from the present project, but both around the larger theme that the discussion of historical trends in these areas, and their openness to evaluation in terms of gain and loss, constitutes a vital way for students to deal with their approach to key phenomena in modern life -- not necessarily to change their approach, but to be able to see it as a social choice, not an immutable necessity.

Health levels undeniably constitute a modern success story in important respects. One has to cater to the belief in progress in recounting changes in mortality rates, even when this is qualified by noting the rather limited periods and somewhat limited age ranges in and for which the most dramatic gains were made. Readily enough might the rise of doctors and the displacing of superstitution seem to parallel the history of health, a parallelism emphasized in fact in most conventional medical histories. The complete history, however, involves also the assessment of the rise of doctors and the rise of the belief in doctors as social artifacts, not simply the empirical result of health or medical progress. Hence, for example, attention to the professionalization process of the nineteenth century, or the faith-like quality of elements of belief in doctors even in more recent decades. The purpose of analysis of this sort is first of course to provide a rounded historical assessment; and it is not designed to conduce toward any particular approach to doctors in contemporary society. But it is designed to conduce

to thinking about one's own belief system, to understand it as a social product even when there is no desire or need to change it.

Serious researchers in the history of childhood have proclaimed the twentieth century as the first century in which children have been decently regarded and treated, so it is obvious that here, too, historical findings readily reinforce dominant beliefs about the brutalities of the past compared to modern enlightenment. Close to the subject, students might be expected to have their own empirical questions about the quality of modern childrearing, but in fact, in class settings, they tend to mirror larger public beliefs about progress; only with difficulty can they put modern problems in a more complicated and general context. Certainly, when the historian must introduce concepts like breaking the will, and practices like swaddling or wet-nursing, as characteristic of older forms of childrearing, the ability to complicate facile belief systems must be hardwon. A major theme of the history of modern childhood in the Western world has to be the breaking down of a number of harsh disciplinary practices and with them practices, or neglects, that contributed to massive child death rates; a related theme, less firm but certainly important for speculation, is the rise of deeper, more pervasive love for children. All of this seems so clearly good, so clearly desirable, that it might seem difficult to use this particular historical theme to obtain anything but the most benign and self-congratulatory perspective on ourselves in our relationship to the past.

But this is, of course, precisely where more complex perspective is particularly needed. The social history teacher must convey a number of undoubted improvements in childrearing as facts. And, as with medicine, his purpose need not

at all be to promote a reversal of modern beliefs. But his purpose most definitely is to promote serious thinking about these beliefs. In the present case this can begin with the juxtaposition of some glaring modern problems in childhood with the apparent historical record of progress: if childrearing has improve so much, why the massive rise, in modern society, of adolescent suicide? Why the broader tendency to view adolescents as troublesome and, indeed, the modern need to invent the whole concept of adolescence as a particularly troubled period of life. From this, it becomes valid to discuss some of the advantages of older, apparently harsher childrearing methods: the absence of pronounced identity crises, for example, in a society where children associated less completely with peers, more regularly with adults whose lives they were expected to imitate. It becomes valid to consider the drawbacks that attend some apparent modern advantages: greater love for children sounds marvelous but how does it mesh with the exposure of older children to unprecendentedly impersonal institutions? It would doubtless be appalling to produce a class of budding social history addicts bent on restoring past standards of childhood, but this is unlikely. But a chance to view modern conventions of childhood with a bit of detachment, to see them as sources of some quite familiar problems as well as benefits, can only be enlightening. And enlightenment might, to some extent, make the drawbacks a bit easier to modify in our own social future.

The purpose, again, is a simple one. Some basic impulses in modern society are so deep rooted that we grow up viewing them as virtually inevitable: more medicine for better health, more love for better childhoods. Social history, devoted to these topics, shows the trends as social artifacts. It

does not thereby prove them undesirable. But it does subject them to a new kind of understanding, and that kind of understanding, which really involves how our present stems from our past, is surely a basic goal of history education.

And sometimes this purpose can be extended more personally, beyond a general historical consideration of the way we evaluate basic features of our social life. The social history of leisure, that marvelous field that has opened up so excitingly in recent years, gives clear substance to the frequent claim that modern people are uncertain, individually as well as collectively, about what purpose leisure is supposed to serve. For reasons of recent history we are legitimately unsure whether leisure is supposed to be fun, a dramatic contrast to work, or devoted to self-improvement and enhancement of an ability to work. Leisure is not of course very explicitly discussed in the schools in any fashion, so it is already a gain simply to bring it to the attention of students as a topic that deserves analysis. It could be discussed in terms of some ideal-typical models of what leisure should be, so that students could bring the information they all have about leisure, simply from having survived until high school, to this kind of abstract evaluation. But it is preferable still to combine elements of this approach -- general knowledge about aspects of contemporary leisure with discussions of what should be -- with a discussion of actual past patterns of leisure and how and why they evolved into present leisure practices and purposes. By this means a student can acquire significant historical knowledge, and also an opportunity to hone his or her own sense of what leisure purposes should be not in terms of absolute rights and

wrongs, which students produce readily but often meaninglessly, but in terms of the real social constraints and opportunities of modern life. Social history does not tell students how to choose proper family, or work, or leisure values. But good social history teaching does force students to consider what values they want for themselves, and to an extent what difficulties they might encounter, in modern society, in pursuing them.

Sometimes, in my college teaching experience, the process of personal evaluation can go embarrassingly far. Last year, in a course on the history of work and leisure, a young man came to talk with me about the modern version of the dilemma between choosing work because of anticipated intrinsic satisfaction and choosing work because of instrumental reward. He said he'd been thinking hard about the problems of an instrumental approach, and then he paused before saying that though he had intended to become a biologist his real love was medieval literature, and what did I think about that as a career? I had no advice to give him as a historian, of course, but as a suitably pessimistic academic I did ship him over to some even more pessimistic medievalists, and to my knowledge he returned, unembittered, to biology. This is an unusual case, fortunately; but it is not unusual to have an interesting handful of students, in each class, so personally aroused by the implications of a historical discussion of an aspect of life that has to have meaning for them that their own grasp of themselves, as well as their understanding of their social world, has been enhanced.

On several levels, then, social history promotes intelligent discussion of values. The result can engage at least some students in a new realization

of the relevance of historical understanding. It can catch some up short simply by opening to serious inquiry topics that are never discussed with any sense of context, at any stage of the educational process. The demands this process can place on the teacher, in knowledge but also in a high level of sensitivity, are great. But the result can be little short of glorious: the promotion of new insight into the forces that shape fundamental features of modern human life. If this seems too grandiose a claim, it can be put more prosaically. Any historian who has discussed some of the new themes of social history with an adult audience has inevitably encountered the reaction, really the lament: I didn't know that was history. I take this to mean something more than a factual statement, that current historical research topics were not part of history course fare in the past. I think it means that adults can perceive that this newer history really does illumine key aspects of the human experience. It provides, at least for some, a means of personal understanding. It is this understanding, along with an important new range of facts and concepts, that must I believe be made available as part of the school-derived definition of what history is.

I have shied away, in these remarks, from a claim that social history will attract more student devotion than ordinary history does. This may be a logical conclusion from my assessment of the real relevance of social history to an understanding of the world we operate in, but the problem is really empirical and on this we must await more data from actual tests of materials within the present project. Judging by college teaching experience, some students will be drawn to the stuff of social history who are repelled by the elitist, or formalistic, or simply lifeless qualities

of some conventional history. But others will be a bit confused by the absence of clear dates and processions of names; I well recall a student who was leaving a lecture at Rutgers University, in a western civilization course devoted mainly to social history, saying "these past weeks have been fun but I keep waiting for the history part." Social history is in some ways harder than regular history, calling on a higher learning level or at least an ability to identify different kinds of facts, and this challenge as well as unfamiliarity might deter some. And some students can't be interested in any kind of history, and some probably can't be interested in much of anything. There is no need to be Panglossian in our assessment of social history's wonder-working in the schools.

What does logically follow from the above, however, is a renewed belief that, popular or not, social history must be widely taught. It really does aid human understanding. It really does force consideration of issues and values vital to thinking about what life consists of, and modern life in particular. The statement of the values implications of social history is really a statement that the excitement of the best social history research, the sense of discovery of what makes real people tick, can and must be conveyed in teaching. We have the basis now for a much fuller sense of how the present relates to the past, of where we have come from to get where we are. It is imperative that the kind of thinking involved in this broadening of history -- the sense that the present can be judged, in virtually all its aspects, by an understanding of its historical provenance -- along with some of the principal factual discoveries of social history, be conveyed in the schools. Social history research has long had a missionary quality, a sense of opening vast

new windows onto the past. It is time to impart this same quality to history teaching, and through it to the minds of at least some students newly exposed to what is, again, essentially a new way of evaluating basic features of modern society and of individual life therein.